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# THE OLD SHIPS

BY  
JAMES ELROY FLECKER

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THE POETRY BOOKSHOP  
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JAMES ELROY FLECKER died in Switzerland on the 3rd of January, 1915, aged 30. His principal volumes of poetry were "The Bridge of Fire" (1907), "Forty-Two Poems" (1911), and "The Golden Journey to Samarkand" (1913).

The following pages contain most of the poems written during the last two years of his life, arranged approximately in chronological order. Several of them have appeared in periodicals; others are here printed for the first time.



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## THE OLD SHIPS.

I HAVE seen old ships sail like swans asleep  
 Beyond the village which men still call Tyre,  
 With leaden age o'ercargoed, dipping deep  
 For Famagusta and the hidden sun  
 That rings black Cyprus with a lake of fire ;  
 And all those ships were certainly so old  
 Who knows how oft with squat and noisy gun,  
 Questing brown slaves or Syrian oranges,  
 The pirate Genoese  
 Hell raked them till they rolled  
 Blood, water, fruit and corpses up the hold.  
 But now through friendly seas they softly run,  
 Painted the mid-sea blue or shore-sea green,  
 Still patterned with the vine and grapes in gold.

But I have seen  
 Pointing her shapely shadows from the dawn  
 And image tumbled on a rose-swept bay  
 A drowsy ship of some yet older day ;  
 And, wonder's breath indrawn,  
 Thought I—who knows—who knows—but in  
     that same  
 (Fished up beyond Aeaea, patched up new  
 —Stern painted brighter blue—)



That talkative, bald-headed seaman came  
(Twelve patient comrades sweating at the oar)  
From Troy's doom-crimson shore,  
And with great lies about his wooden horse  
Set the crew laughing, and forgot his course.

It was so old a ship—who knows, who knows?  
—And yet so beautiful, I watched in vain  
To see the mast burst open with a rose,  
And the whole deck put on its leaves again.



## THE BLUE NOON.

**W**HEN the whole sky is vested silken blue  
 With not one fleece to view,  
 Drown your deep eyes afar, and see you must  
 How the light azure dust  
 And speckled atoms of the polished skies  
 Are large blue butterflies.  
 The proof? Lie in a field on heavy noons,  
 When Nature drones and croons  
 And on man's distant cry or dog's far bark  
 Hush sets the instant mark,  
 Look up: when nothing earthly stirs or sings  
 You hear them wave their wings,  
 And watch the breeze their vanity awakes  
 Light on the heavenly lakes.  
 But when the shades before the sun's huge fall  
 In sham retreat grow tall,  
 Their ambushed allies, the impatient stars,  
 Make ready for bright wars,  
 And shoot ten million arrows to chastise  
 The tardy butterflies  
 Who dive in hosts toward the diving sphere  
 That holds the light's frontier,  
 And the poor vanquished, turning as they glide,  
 Show their gold underside.



## A FRAGMENT.

O POURING westering streams  
 Shouting that I have leapt the mountain bar,  
 Down curve on curve my journey's white way gleams—  
 My road along the river of return.

I know the countries where the white moons burn,  
 And heavy star on star  
 Dips on the pale and crystal desert hills.  
 I know the river of the sun that fills  
 With founts of gold the lakes of Orient sky.

\* \* \* \* \*

And I have heard a voice of broken seas  
 And from the cliffs a cry.  
 Ah still they learn, those cave-eared Cyclades,  
 The Triton's friendly or his fearful horn  
 And why the deep sea-bells but seldom chime,  
 And how those waves and with what spell-swept rhyme  
 In years of morning, on a summer's morn  
 Whispering round his castle on the coast,  
 Lured young Achilles from his haunted sleep  
 And drave him out to dive beyond those deep  
 Dim purple windows of the empty swell,  
 His ivory body flitting like a ghost  
 Over the holes where flat blind fishes dwell,  
 All to embrace his mother throned in her shell.



## NARCISSUS.

O POOL in which we dallied  
 And splashed the prostrate Noon !  
 O Water-boy, more pallid  
 Than any watery moon !  
 O Lilies round him turning !  
 O broken Lilies, strewn !  
 O silver Lutes of Morning !  
 O Red of the Drums of Noon.

O dusky-plumaged sorrow !  
 O ebon Swans of Care—  
 I sought thee on the Morrow,  
 And never found thee there !  
 I breathed the vapour-blended  
 Cloud of a dim despair :  
 White lily, is it ended ?  
 Gold lily—oh, golden hair !

The pool that was thy dwelling  
 I hardly knew again,  
 So black it was, and swelling  
 With bitter wind and rain.  
 'Mid the bowed leaves I lingered,  
 Lashed by the blast of Pain,  
 Till evening, storm-rose-fingered,  
 Beckoned to night again.

There burst a flood of Quiet  
 Over the unstellèd skies ;  
 Full moon flashed out a-riot :  
 Near her I dreamt thine eyes  
 Afloat with night, still trembling  
 With captured mysteries :  
 But sulphured wracks, assembling,  
 Redarkened the bright skies.

Ah, thou at least art lying  
 Safe at the white nymph's feet,  
 Listless, while I, slow-dying,  
 Twist my gaunt limbs for heat !  
 Yet I'll to Earth, my Mother :  
 So, boy, I'll still entreat  
 Forgive me—for none other  
 Like Earth is honey-sweet !



STILLNESS.

WHEN the words rustle no more,  
 And the last work's done,  
 When the bolt lies deep in the door,  
 And Fire, our Sun,  
 Falls on the dark-laned meadows of the floor ;

When from the clock's last chime to the next chime  
 Silence beats his drum,  
 And Space with gaunt grey eyes and her brother Time  
 Wheeling and whispering come,  
 She with the mould of form and he with the loom of  
 rhyme :

Then twittering out in the night my thought-birds flee,  
 I am emptied of all my dreams :  
 I only hear Earth turning, only see  
 Ether's long bankless streams,  
 And only know I should drown if you  
 Laid not your hand on me.

## THE PENSIVE PRISONER.

**M**Y thoughts came drifting down the Prison where I lay—  
 Through the Windows of their Wings the stars were  
 shining—  
 The wings bore me away—the russet Wings and grey  
 With feathers like the moon-bleached Flowers—I was a God  
 reclining :  
 Beneath me lay my Body's Chain and all the Dragons born  
 of Pain  
 As I burned through the Prison Roof to walk on Pavement  
 Shining.

The Wild Wind of Liberty swept through my Hair and sang  
 beyond :  
 I heard the Souls of men asleep chattering in the Eaves  
 And rode on topmost Boughs of Heaven's single-moon-fruited  
 Silver Wand,  
 Night's unifying Tree whereof the central Stars be leaves—  
 O Thoughts, Thoughts, Thoughts,—Fire-angel-birds relent-  
 less—  
 Will you not brood in God's Star-tree and leave Red-Heart  
 tormentless !



## HEXAMETERS.

**O** HAPPY Dome so lightly swimming through storm-riven  
 Aether  
 Blue burning and gold, the hollow of Chaos adorning,  
 Shine, happy Dome of th' air, on Sea thy sister, on ancient  
 Plains, on sharp snowbeard mountains, on silvery waters,  
 On knotted eld-mossed trees, on roses starry with April—  
 But most shine upon one lying tormented, a dreamer,  
 Thy lover. Ah wherefore did a rift so cruel across thee  
 Open? A long tremulous sighing comes thence, with a great  
 wind,  
 Darkness ever blowing round thy blue curtain. A finger  
 Out of Hell aims at me. Gather, O sweet Dome o' the Morning,  
 Thy rapid ardent flamy quiver, thy splintery clusters:  
 Send a volley straight through to the heart of this desolation,  
 And burning, blasting with a shaft of thunderous azure,  
 Break the ebon soldiers, restore his realm for a dreamer!

# PHILOMEL.

(From the French of Paul Fort).

O SING, in heart of silence hiding near,  
 Thou whom the roses bend their heads to hear!  
 In silence down the moonlight slides her wing :  
 Will no rose breathe while Philomel doth sing ?  
 No breath—and deeper yet the perfume grows :  
 The voice of Philomel can slay a rose :  
 The song of Philomel on nights serene  
 Implores the gods who roam in shades unseen,  
 But never calls the roses, whose perfume  
 Deepens and deepens, as they wait their doom.  
 Is it not silence whose great bosom heaves ?  
 Listen, a rose-tree drops her quiet leaves.

Now silence flashes lightning like a storm :  
 Now silence is a cloud, and cradled warm  
 By risings and by fallings of the tune  
 That Philomel doth sing, as shines the moon,  
 —A bird's or some immortal voice from Hell ?

There is no breath to die with, Philomel !  
 And yet the world has changed without a breath.  
 The moon lies heavy on the roses' death,  
 And every rosebush droops its leafy crown.  
 A gust of roses has gone sweeping down.



The panicked garden drives her leaves about :  
The moon is masked : it flares and flickers out.  
O shivering petals on your lawn of fear,  
Turn down to Earth and hear what you shall hear.  
A beat, a beat, a beat beneath the ground,  
And hurrying beats, and one great beat profound.  
A heart is coming close : I have heard pass  
The noise of a great Heart upon the grass.  
The petals reel. Earth opens : from beneath  
The ashen roses on their lawn of death,  
Raising her peaceful brow, the grand and pale  
Demeter listens to the nightingale.

From Jean Moréas' "Stances."

THE garden rose I paid no honour to,  
So humbly poised and fashioned on its spray,  
Has now by wind unkissed, undrenched by dew,  
Lived captive in her vase beyond a day.

And tired and pale, bereft of earth and sun,  
Her blossom over and her hour of pride,  
She has dropped all her petals, one by one,  
Unmindful if she lived or how she died.

When doom is passing in her dusky glade  
Let us learn silence. In this evening hour,  
O heart bowed down with mystery and shade,  
Too heavy lies the spectre of a flower!



## THE PRINCESS.

*A Story from the Modern Greek.*

A PRINCESS armed a privateer to sail the Chersonese  
And fitted it with purple sails to belly in the breeze,  
With golden cords and oaken boards and a name writ out in  
pearls,  
And all the jolly mariners were gallant little girls.

The King's Son he came hunting her in frigates two or three,  
"Give me one kiss, Princess," he cried, "and take a ship  
from me ;  
And would you like the yellow boat or would you like the red,  
Or would you take myself and mine, the gold and green  
instead ?"

"Sir, handsome fellow as you are, it's curious, you know,  
To ask a maid for kisses in mid-archipelago :  
But come and fight with us, young man ; the prize is for  
the brave."  
They fought: it chanced the lady won and took him for a slave.

She drave him to the yellow boat and lashed him to the oar.  
"Now pull, my handsome Prince," said she, "till you can  
pull no more."  
"O Princess, do but listen to a valiant boy's appeal,  
And take me from this bitter oar, and put me at the wheel."

“O foolish Prince,” she answered him ; “back to your oar  
and pull.

Row hard and soon we’ll anchor in the gulf of Istamboul.  
While the slaves collect provisions and the sailors go for  
drink

You may chance to find your Captain not so brutal as you  
think !”



## PANNYRA OF THE GOLDEN HEEL.

(Albert Samain).

THE revel pauses and the room is still :  
The silver flute invites her with a trill,  
And buried in her great veils fold on fold  
Rises to dance Pannyra, Heel of Gold.  
Her light steps cross ; her subtle arm impels  
The clinging drapery ; it shrinks and swells,  
Hollows and floats, and bursts into a whirl :  
She is a flower, a moth, a flaming girl.  
All lips are silent ; eyes are all in trance :  
She slowly wakes the madness of the dance,  
Windy and wild the golden torches burn ,  
She turns, and swifter yet she tries to turn,  
Then stops : a sudden marble stiff she stands,  
The veil that round her coiled its spiral bands,  
Checked in its course, brings all its folds to rest,  
And clinging to bright limb and pointed breast  
Shows, as beneath silk waters woven fine,  
Pannyra naked in a flash divine !

## THE GATE OF THE ARMIES.

(From *Henri de Régnier*).

**S**WING out thy doors, high gate that dreadst  
 not night,  
 Bronze to the left and iron to the right.  
 Deep in a cistern has been flung thy key ;  
 If dread thee close, anathema on thee ;  
 And like twin shears let thy twin portals cut  
 The hand's fist through that would thee falsely shut.  
 Again thy dusky vault hath heard resound  
 Steps of strong men who never yet gave ground,  
 Marching with whom came breathless and came  
 bold  
 Victory naked with broad wings of gold.  
 Her glaive to guide them calmly soars and dips ;  
 Her kiss is lifeblood's purple on their lips.  
 From rose-round mouths the clarions shake and  
 shrill,  
 A brazen boom of bees that hunt to kill.  
 " Drink, swarm of war, stream from your plated  
 hives  
 " And cull death's dust on flowery-fleshed fierce  
 lives,  
 " So, when back home to native town ye march,  
 " Beneath those golden wings and my black arch  
 " May all men watch my pavement, as each pace  
 " Of your red feet leaves clear its sanguine trace.



## THE OLD WARSHIP ABLAZE.

**F**OUNDER, old battleship ; thy fight is done !  
 Yonder ablaze like thee now sinks the sun,  
 Shooting the last grand broadside of his beams  
 Over thy blackened plates and writhing seams.  
 Against hard odds thy crew played all their part,  
 Driving thee deathwards that the foe should smart  
 Till the guns brake and fire leapt up insane,  
 And they abandoned thee, to fight again,  
 Who on thy deck, where flicker the gaunt flames,  
 Have left so many dead—won such proud names.

Dark flow the waiting waves : one can still see  
 Thy giant murderer edge sullenly  
 Eastward among the swelling towers of night.  
 Canst thou, dying, forget in Hell's despite  
 Thy freight of fire and blood, the roar and rage  
 Of waves and guns ? Thou liest age on age  
 Tranced like the Princess in her sleepy Thorn  
 In that curv'd bay where once the film of morn  
 Brake azure to thy bugles, skilled to bring  
 The Afric breeze, who, prompt on honied wing  
 Silvered the waves and then the olive trees,  
 And shook like sceptres those stiff companies  
 The columned palms,—nor till the air was full  
 Of flash and whisper came the noon-tide lull.  
 Or that far country's ten-year-buried eves  
 Or moonlight scattered like a shower of leaves

Dost thou recall?—Or how on this same deck,  
 Whose flaming planks blood-boultered tilt to wreck,  
 The dance went round to music, and how shone  
 For English grey, black eyes of Lebanon?

But Eastward and still east the World is thrown  
 Like a mad hunter seeking dawns unknown  
 Who plunges deep in sparkless woods of gloom.  
 Lebanon long hath turned into night's womb  
 And through her stellèd casements pass new dreams:  
 Thee too from those last no-more-rival beams  
 Earth rolleth back. Alone O ship, O flower,  
 O flame, thou sailest for a moth-weak hour!

They come at last, the bird-soft pattering feet!  
 Flame high, old ship; the Fair throng up to greet  
 Thy splendid doom. See the long spirits, curled  
 Beside their dead, stand upright free of the world!  
 And seize the bright shapes loosed from blood-warm  
 sleep,  
 They, the true ghosts, whose eyes are fixed and deep!

O ship, O fire, O fancy! A swift roar  
 Has rent the brow of night. Thou nevermore  
 Shalt glide to channel port or Syrian town;  
 Light ghosts have danced thee like a plummet down,  
 And, swift as Fate through skies with storm bestrewn,  
 Dips out ironical that ship New Moon.



## NOVEMBER EVES.

NOVEMBER Evenings! Damp and still  
They used to cloak Leckhampton hill,  
And lie down close on the grey plain,  
And dim the dripping window-pane,  
And send queer winds like Harlequins  
That seized our elms for violins  
And struck a note so sharp and low  
Even a child could feel the woe.

Now fire chased shadow round the room;  
Tables and chairs grew vast in gloom:  
We crept about like mice, while Nurse  
Sat mending, solemn as a hearse,  
And even our unlearned eyes  
Half closed with choking memories.

Is it the mist or the dead leaves,  
Or the dead men—November eves?

# GOD SAVE THE KING.

GOD save our gracious King,  
 Nation and State and King,  
     God save the King!  
 Grant him the Peace divine,  
 But if his Wars be Thine  
 Flash on our fighting line  
     Victory's Wing!

Thou in his suppliant hands  
 Hast placed such Mighty Lands:  
     Save thou our King!  
 As once from golden Skies  
 Rebels with flaming eyes,  
 So the King's Enemies  
     Doom Thou and fling!

Mountains that break the night  
 Holds He by eagle right  
     Stretching far Wing!  
 Dawn lands for Youth to reap,  
 Dim lands where Empires sleep,  
 His! And the Lion Deep  
     Roars for the King.



But most these few dear miles  
 Of sweetly-meadowed Isles,—  
     England all Spring;  
 Scotland that by the marge  
 Where the blank North doth charge  
 Hears Thy Voice loud and large,  
     Save, and their King!

Grace on the golden Dales  
 Of Thine old Christian Wales  
     Shower till they sing,  
 Till Erin's Island lawn  
 Echoes the dulcet-drawn  
 Song with a cry of Dawn—  
     God save the King!

## THE BURIAL IN ENGLAND.

THESE then we honour : these in fragrant earth  
 Of their own country in great peace forget  
 Death's lion-roar and gust of nostril-flame  
 Breathing souls across to the Evening Shore.  
 Soon over these the flowers of our hill sides  
 Shall wake and wave and nod beneath the bee  
 And whisper love to Zephyr year on year,  
 Till the red war gleam like a dim red rose  
 Lost in the garden of the Sons of Time.  
 But ah what thousands no such friendly doom  
 Awaits,—whom silent comrades in full night  
 Gazing right and left shall bury swiftly  
 By the cold flicker of an alien moon.

Ye veiled women, ye with folded hands,  
 Mourning those you half hoped for Death too dear,  
 I claim no heed of you. Broader than earth  
 Love stands eclipsing nations with his wings,  
 While Pain, his shadow, delves as black and deep  
 As he e'er flamed or flew. Citizens draw  
 Back from their dead awhile. Salute the flag!



If this flag though royally always borne,  
 Deceived not dastard, ever served base gold ;  
 If the dark children of the old Forest  
 Once feared it, or ill Sultans mocked it furled,  
 Yet now as on a thousand death-reaped days  
 It takes once more the unquestionable road.  
 O bright with blood of heroes, not a star  
 Of all the north shines purer on the sea !

Our foes—the hardest men a state can forge,  
 An army wrenched and hammered like a blade  
 Toledo wrought neither to break nor bend,  
 Dipped in that ice the pedantry of power,  
 And toughened with wry gospels of dismay ;  
 Such are these who brake down the door of France,  
 Wolves worrying at the old World's honour  
 Hunting Peace not to prison but her tomb.  
 But ever as some brown song-bird whose torn nest  
 Gapes robbery, darts on the hawk like fire,  
 So Peace hath answered, angry and in arms.  
 And from each grey hamlet and bright town of France  
 From where the apple or the olive grows  
 Or thin tall strings of poplars on the plains,  
 From the rough castle of the central hills,  
 From the three coasts—of mist and storm and sun  
 And meadows of the four deep-rolling streams,  
 From every house whose windows hear God's bell  
 Crowding the twilight with the wings of prayer  
 And flash their answer in a golden haze,

Stream the young soldiers who are never tired.  
 For all the foul mists vanished when that land  
 Called clear, as in the sunny Alpine morn  
 The jodeller awakes the frosty slopes  
 To thunderous replies,—soon fading far  
 Among the vales like songs of dead children.  
 But the French guns' answer, ne'er to echoes weak  
 Diminished, bursts from the deep trenches yet;  
 And its least light vibration blew to dust  
 The weary factions,—priest's or guild's or king's,  
 And side by side troop up the old partisans  
 The same laughing, invincible, tough men  
 Who gave Napoleon Europe like a loaf,  
 For slice and portion,—not so long ago!  
 Either to Alsace or loved lost Lorraine  
 They pass, or inexpugnable Verdun  
 Ceinture with steel, or stung with faith's old cry  
 Assume God's vengeance for his temple stones.  
 But you maybe best wish them for the north  
 Beside you 'neath low skies in loamed fields,  
 Or where the great line hard on the duned shore  
 Ends and night leaps to England's sea-borne flame.  
 Never one drop of Lethe's stagnant cup  
 Dare dim the fountains of the Marne and Aisne  
 Since still the flowers and meadow-grass unmown  
 Lie broken with the imprint of those who fell,  
 Briton and Gaul—but fell immortal friends  
 And fell victorious and like tall trees fell.

But young men, you who loiter in the town,  
 Need you be roused with overshadowed words  
 Country, Empire, Honour, Liège, Louvain?  
 Pay your own Youth the duty of her dreams.  
 For what sleep shall keep her from the thrill  
 Of War's star-smiting music, with its swell  
 Of shore and forest and horns high in the wind,  
 (Yet pierced with that too sharp piping which if man  
 Hear and not fear he shall face God unscathed)?  
 What, are you poets whose vain souls contrive  
 Sorties and sieges spun of the trickling moon  
 And such a rousing ghost catastrophe  
 You need no concrete marvels to be saved?  
 Or live you here too lustily for change?  
 Sail you such pirate seas on such high quests,  
 Hunt you thick gold or striped and spotted beasts,  
 Or tread the lone ways of the swan-like mountains?  
 Excused. But if, as I think, breeched in blue,  
 Stalled at a counter, cramped upon a desk,  
 You drive a woman's pen-craft—or a slave's,  
 What chain shall hold you when the trumpets play  
 Calling from the blue hill behind your town  
 Calling over the seas, calling for you!  
 "But," do you murmur? "we'd not be as those.  
 "Death is a dour recruiting-sergeant: see,  
 "These women weep we celebrate the dead."  
 Boys, drink the cup of warning dry. Face square  
 That old grim hazard, "Glory-or-the-Grave."



Not we shall trick your pleasant years away,  
Yet is not Death the great adventure still,  
And is it all loss to set ship clean anew  
When heart is young and life an eagle poised?  
Choose, you're no cowards. After all, think some,  
Since we are men and shrine immortal souls  
Surely for us as for these nobly dead  
The Kings of England lifting up their swords  
Shall gather at the gate of Paradise.

## THE TRUE PARADISE.

**L**ORD, is the Poet to destruction vowed,  
 Like the dawn-feather of an April cloud,  
 Which signs in russet character or grey  
 The name of Beauty on the book of Day?  
 We poets crave no heav'n but what is ours—  
 These trees beside these rivers ; these same flowers  
 Shaped and enfragranced to the English field  
 Where Thy best florist-craft is full revealed.  
 Trees by the river, birds upon the bough  
 My soul shall ask for, whose flesh enjoys them now  
 Through both the pale-blue windows of quick Mind ;  
 Grant me earth's treats in Paradise to find.  
 Nor listen to that island-bound St. John  
 Who'd have no Sea in Heaven, no Sea to sail upon !  
 Remake this World less Man's and Nature's Pain ;  
 Save such dear torment as the chill of Rain  
 When the Sun flouts us like a maid her man  
 Drowned in long meshes of a silver Fan.  
 Nor, Lord, the good fatigue of labouring breath  
 Destroy, but only Sickness, Age and Death.  
 Let old Plays teach Despair's sad grandeur still,  
 And legends trumpet War's last Hero-thrill.







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Flecker, James Elroy  
The old ships

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